



Institute on Religion and Public Policy:

Religious Freedom in Mozambique

Executive Summary

The Republic of Mozambique is a religiously pluralistic society. According to the 1997 census, approximately half the population is Christian, 20 percent Muslim, and the remainder are primarily followers of traditional indigenous religions. There are also small numbers of Jews, Hindus, and Baha'is in the country. Among Christians about half are Catholic and the remainder include a wide array of Protestant and other Christian groups including Anglicans, Baptists, Mormons, Congregationalists, Methodists, Nazarenes, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. There are substantial numbers of smaller evangelical, Pentecostal, and apostolic groups as well. There are several groups representing Islamic interests in the country including the Mohammedan Community, Islamic Congress, and the Islamic Council.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Introduction to the Legal Situation

Article 78, Section 1 of the Constitution of Mozambique provides for the freedom of religion stating, "All citizens shall have the freedom to practice or not to practice a religion." Article 78, Section 2 further expounds upon this right guaranteeing religious institutions a modicum of protection mandating, "Religious denominations shall have the right to pursue their religious aims freely and to own and acquire assets for the purpose of achieving these aims." Article 66 provides for equal treatment of all religious groups legally, declaring they shall, "enjoy the same rights, and shall be subject to the same duties regardless of color, race, sex, ethnic origin, place of birth, religion, educational level, social position, the legal status of their parents, or their profession."

In General, the government of Mozambique enforces these laws and protects the freedom of religion. The Law on Religious Freedom requires all religious institutions and missionary organizations to register with the ministry of justice. Groups registering were required to reveal their principal source of funding and provide the names of at least 500 followers. However, there were no tangible benefits associated with registration and groups that did not register were allowed to worship without interference.

Government Discrimination and Favoritism

Despite their generally fair and impartial stance, there were several instances in which the government was accused of showing bias and favoritism toward one group or another. Muslims complained about what they viewed as under-representation in the National Assembly, government ministries, and leadership posts in comparison to Christians.

Officially, there are no state-sponsored holidays that are religious in nature. However, there is a National Family Day which falls on December 25, thereby making Christmas a de facto holiday. Consequently, Muslims believe that the Eid al-Fitr should be made a national holiday as well. As it stands, however, Muslims are allowed to take the Eid off and the festival is marked by a Presidential speech and other events.

There are arguments that the Eid al-Fitr festival itself shows favoritism of one group of Muslims over another. The Eid al-Fitr is currently celebrated on the day that the South Asian Muslim community celebrates as opposed to the date which the Black Muslim community celebrates. The Black Muslim community commemorates the start of the Eid based on when the full moon is first sighted from within the geographical boundaries of Mozambique. The South Asian Muslim community marks the beginning of the Eid as whenever the first full moon is seen from a wider area, meaning the dates do not align.

Property Restitution Issues

The government nationalized many houses of worship and other religious properties in 1977. Most properties have been returned to their respective owners. However, both the Catholic Church and Muslim communities complain that many of their other properties such as “schools, health centers, and private residences” remain in the hands of state. The return of these properties is complicated by the fact that many of them currently operate as “government-administered” schools and clinics. The issue is left to the provincial governments and the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

Societal Discrimination and Violence

The majority of interactions between religious groups in Mozambique are peaceful. Nevertheless, a major incident did occur recently in the provincial capital, Lichinga, in the province of Niassa in northwest Mozambique. From late August to early September 2007, three mosques were burned down. Police investigated the matter thoroughly and apprehended several suspects within weeks. The respective religious communities did much to soothe tensions and prevent further sectarian violence.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Relations between the United States and Mozambique are generally good. The U.S. has provided significant amounts of emergency food, humanitarian, and financial aid to Mozambique. The U.S. has also contributed to the peace process. Mozambique's current president, President Guebuza is intent on improving U.S. – Mozambique relations, and has work ardently to promote trade between the two countries.

Conclusion

Generally, Mozambique is a positive example of religious freedom and inter-religious cooperation. The few issues that do exist are minimal or easily ameliorated. The presence of registration laws is troublesome. However, the fact that unregistered groups are allowed to worship without hindrance alleviates many of the problems associated with registration laws. The government and the religious communities must work together to come up with mutually beneficial solutions to issues concerning property restitution. The government should do more to include and represent the Muslim community in the government. The Eid should be given de facto religious status in a similar manner to Christmas and an agreement between the Black and South Asian Muslim communities should be reached regarding the starting date of the Eid. Lastly, while the mosque burning incident in Lichinga was deplorable, the government and the religious communities should be commended for their responsible and professional response to the situation.